



Big Fracas over Tiny Bug

By: Marc Albert – Alameda Sun Staff Writer

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For a tiny bug, the light brown apple moth is creating a monster-sized controversy. Ever since state officials announced plans to eradicate an infestation of the pest with aerial spraying, activists have accused state scientists of a plan that will sicken the public and be ineffective against the fluttering menace.

Tuesday night, state officials and activists each spoke before Alameda City Council, with a mixture of conflicting science, emotional appeals and conspiracies...

State officials say the moth has infested the five-county Bay Area, Santa Cruz and Monterey counties and is a danger to apple and grape crops. Rather than apply pesticides, officials with the California Department of Food and Agriculture are planning a four-pronged attack on the moth. But plans to use airplanes to release a moth pheromone over urban areas have activists accusing officials of recklessly employing chemicals dangerous to public health. Pheromones are chemicals emitted by various animals that elicit a response in members of the same species...

"We are not trying to kill the moth; we are just going to make sure that they are very, very frustrated," said Robert Dowell, director of the Department of Food and Agriculture's Light Brown Apple Moth Program.

Kawamura accused critics of spreading a "tremendous amount of disinformation," about the spray plan. "Aerial application is not greeted well by anyone," he acknowledged, "including ourselves." Kawamura said that failing to act would increase pesticide use among backyard gardeners and others as the infestation spreads, increasing the general public's exposure to more dangerous chemicals. Activists on Tuesday said the moth was not a threat to crops and did not damage fruit. Activists say the moth has been in California for about 50 years, while state officials say the moth arrived within the last five to 10 years.

State officials are also taking on the moths by releasing millions of sting-less parasitic wasps, and attaching individual twist ties treated with the pheromone in areas with an infestation. The aerial spraying will commence locally in August. Ground application is already underway. Activists have blamed the moth for triggering nearly 650 people to seek some kind of medical care after aerial spraying last year in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties. State officials said they are investigating every claim and will cancel the spraying if it proves a danger to public health.

Councilman Frank Matarrese asked Kawamura if spraying could be conducted while farm workers were present in a field...Kawamura said no. State officials later explained that state labor law bars the spraying of any material other than water while farm workers are present and that the workplace safety regulation should not be seen as a condemnation of the pheromone.

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